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BEN ASHER'S RHYMES ON THE HEBREW ACCENTS.

PART OF A NEW INTRODUCTION TO A FORTHCOMING
RE-ISSUE¹ OF "THE HEBREW ACCENTS,"
BY ARTHUR DAVIS.

It may be interesting to glance at the work assigned to Ben Asher, probably the first treatise on the special subject of the accents. Ben Asher's book is, for us, a sphinx: it mutters like an ancient oracle. To solve its riddles is difficult; the whole book is penned in rhythmic rhyme, the opening clause runs thus:—

סדר סוד המעמים שנים עשר רשומים כמאורות מקוימים מהם קטנים
ומהם רמים חרוזים ולא נעלמים בפי נבונים וחכמים בשום שכל חתומים:

The order of the symbols' secret lore,
The twelve designed
Like to fixed stars of yore,
These great, these small;
Each beautifully linked, nor hid at all.
Uttered by those of understanding mind;
Set in the way of wisdom, sealed withal.

Elsewhere a clause concludes thus:—

כל המקרא על זה מפי סופר וחזן הסמן הזה עוד לא ירצה:

Through Scripture writ clear
By Scribe and by Seer,
The symbol set here
Shall not disappear.

¹ Myers & Co., Booksellers' Row, Strand, London.

And thus throughout its weird, wild leaves. I will conclude this description with a snap-shot at the sphinx as she proposes her enigma of the "Twelve Stars"—or symbols—of the "Three Books" (Job, Proverbs, and Psalms).

שאר הטעמים שמנה • אשר בשלשה ספרים תכונה • חתומים בשכל
ובינה: שמנה שרים גבורים • בנרון ולשון אמורים • וארבעה להם מחוברים •
קטנים ולא מוגברים: כללים שנים עשר נחקקים • ארבעה נגון מפיקים •
ושמנה טעמים ממתקים • והדברים עתיקים: ראשון מכונה חור • כנבור
בכה נאור • בשלושה ספרים בלול ומפור: שני לו רתק • בשפה ולשון
ירתק • לא במהרה יתק: שלישי לו תרץ • לעולם עמו ירץ • לפניו גודר
פרץ: רביעי לו סלק • בטעמים לא יחלק • ובשלשתם יש לו חלק: חמישי
לו נצח • ביד ואצבע נפצח מהודר ומנוצח: ששי לו תקף • ממעל לו עולה
ושוקף • בשני דרכים מחקיף: שביעי לו טרף • באצבע עולה וטורף • בשלוש
ורביעית יצרף: שמיני לו גור • מקל ונקודה משור • בראש ואמצע מאוזר:
שופר הרב • בכל טעם מעורב • פונה מזרח ומערב: ופסקה סדורה • מהם
לא עדורה • עמם תדורה: ומתח פונה ועונה • עם אחיו חונה • ובהרבה
מקומות ישתנה • והוא מהם נמנה: ונייח רד ועולה • פעם בראש תיבה
יעלה • ופעם לימין יסולה: זה יסודם המעלה: היורד ועולה • והפונה ותולה:
בין והשכל ממולא • מי חכם וישמר אלה:

Those left of the accents be eight, revealed
Within three books of the Scripture's field,
By wisdom and understanding sealed.

Eight mighty princes, spoken all
With throat and tongue; and four in thrall,
Enlinked, not mighty men, but small.

Twelve by statute when all are told:
Four making music, and eight that unfold
Exceeding sweet singing; lo, these things, how old!

א

He, called Chizzèr, is set at the head,
Girt like a strong man with power inbred,
All through the three books scattered and spread.

§

The second is Réthek; chained he
Of lip and tongue; and it cannot be
That he shall be broken hastily.

§

The third is Thérets, with him for aye
Doth pleasing harmony hold sway,
Upbuilding the breaches on the way.

§

The fourth Salèk¹; and lo, for this
Among the accents no part there is,
Yet amid three is a portion his.

§

The fifth is Natzéach, set in state,
With a hand upheld and a finger straight,
Mighty and honourable and great.

§

The sixth is Tókef, that riseth high,
And looketh forth with a watchful eye,
In two ways powerful to espy.

§

The seventh Torèf with an upward bent
And a tearing finger forward sent²:
With the third one and the fourth one blent.

§

The eighth Gazèr that hath display
Of a staff and a dot in set array.
Girt at the head and placed midway³.

¹ It is not amongst the accents of the "Twenty-one Books," but found only in the "Three Books."

² Ben Asher probably describes the Torèf or Athnachta found in some MSS. with *one* claw or finger, i. e. two dashes forming an acute angle.

³ The dash over the first letter and the dot over the tone syllable.

|ִנְ and |ִנְ

Shophàr Haràb amid the rest
 Moveth ever upon his quest,
 Turning east and turning west.

|ִנְ

Piskàh is set in order right ;
 From thence he will not disunite,
 Dwelling always full in sight.

ִנְ

Muttàch he turneth about with a cry,
 Camped with his brethren, changed constantly,
 Yet numbered among their company.

And Níach ¹ falling and rising once more
 About a word—now he mounteth o'er,
 Now to the right hand he may soar.

This is their ² order set: Meulèh,
 Yorèd v'Olèh, Ponèh and Tolèh,
 Bin and Haskèel and Memulèh.
 Who is wise will observe their way.

_ *The English rendering of these verses and of the two Hebrew lines on p. 452, is the work of my daughter, Nina Davis.*

¹ It is not clear if נִיחַ or נִיחַהּ or נִיחַהּ is the name of the accent, or if it is an accent at all. According to Heidenheim it is an instruction.

² Viz. : the connective accents.